



Preserving U.S. National Security Interests Through a Liberal World Construct

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The emergence of peer competitors, not terrorism, presents the greatest long-term threat to our national security. Over the past decade, while the United States concentrated its geopolitical focus on fighting two land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, China has quietly begun implementing a strategy to emerge as the dominant imperial power within Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Within the next 2 decades, China will likely replace the United States as the Asia-Pacific regional hegemonic power, if not replace us as the global superpower.¹ Although China presents its rise as peaceful and non-hegemonic, its construction of naval bases in neighboring countries and military expansion in the region contradict that argument.

With a credible threat to its leading position in a unipolar global order, the United States should adopt a grand strategy of “investment,” building legitimacy and capacity in the very institutions that will protect our interests in a liberal global construct of the future when we are no longer the dominant imperial power. Similar to the Clinton era's grand strategy of “enlargement,”² investment supports a world order predicated upon a system of basic rules and principles, however, it differs in that the United States should concentrate on the institutions (i.e., United Nations, World Trade Organization, ASEAN, alliances, etc.) that support a world order, as opposed to expanding democracy as a system of governance for other sovereign nations.

Despite its claims of a benevolent expansion, China is already executing a strategy of expansion similar to that of Imperial Japan's Manchukuo policy during the 1930s.³ This three-part strategy involves: “(i) (providing) significant investments in economic infrastructure for extracting natural resources; (ii) (conducting) military interventions (to) protect economic interests; and, (iii) . . .

(annexing) via installation of puppet governments.”⁴ China has already solidified its control over neighboring North Korea and Burma, and has similarly begun more ambitious engagements in Africa and Central Asia where it seeks to expand its frontier.⁵

Noted political scientist Samuel P. Huntington provides further analysis of the motives behind China's imperial aspirations. He contends that “China (has) historically conceived itself as encompassing a “Sinic Zone’. . . (with) two goals: to become the champion of Chinese culture . . . and to resume its historical position, which it lost in the nineteenth century, as the hegemonic power in East Asia.”⁶ Furthermore, China holds one quarter of the world's population, and rapid economic growth will increase its demand for natural resources from outside its borders as its people seek a standard of living comparable to that of Western civilization.

The rise of peer competitors has historically resulted in regional instability and one should compare “the emergence of China to the rise of. . . Germany as the dominant power in Europe in the late nineteenth century.”⁷ Furthermore, the rise of another peer competitor on the level of the Soviet Union of the Cold War ultimately threatens U.S. global influence, challenging its concepts of human rights, liberalism, and democracy; as well as its ability to co-opt other nations to accept them.⁸ This decline in influence, while initially limited to the Asia-Pacific region, threatens to result in significant conflict if it ultimately leads to a paradigm shift in the ideas and principles that govern the existing world order.

A grand strategy of investment to address the threat of China requires investing in institutions, addressing ungoverned states, and building legitimacy through multilateralism. The United States must build capacity in the existing institutions and alliances accepted globally as legitimate representative bodies of the world's governments. For true legitimacy, the United States must support these institutions, not only when convenient, in order to avoid the appearance of unilateralism, which would ultimately undermine the very organizations upon whom it will rely when it is no longer the global hegemon.

The United States must also address ungoverned states, not only as breeding grounds for terrorism, but as conflicts that threaten to spread into regional instability, thereby drawing in superpowers with competing interests. Huntington proposes that the greatest source of conflict will come from what he defines as one “core” nation's involvement in a conflict between another core nation and a minor state within its immediate sphere of influence.⁹ For example, regional instability in South Asia¹⁰ threatens to involve combatants from the United States, India, China,

and the surrounding nations. Appropriately, the United States, as a global power, must apply all elements of its national power now to address the problem of weak and failing states, which threaten to serve as the principal catalysts of future global conflicts.¹¹

Admittedly, the application of American power in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation raises issues. Experts have posed the question of whether the United States should act as the world's enforcer of stability, imposing its concepts of human rights on other states. In response to this concern, The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty authored a study titled, *The Responsibility to Protect*,¹² calling for revisions to the understanding of sovereignty within the United Nations (UN) charter. This commission places the responsibility to protect peoples of sovereign nations on both the state itself and, more importantly, on the international community.¹³ If approved, this revision will establish a precedent whereby the United States has not only the authority and responsibility to act within the internal affairs of a repressive government, but does so with global legitimacy if done under the auspices of a UN mandate.

Any effort to legitimize and support a liberal world construct requires the United States to adopt a multilateral doctrine which avoids the precepts of the previous administration: “preemptive war, democratization, and U.S. primacy of unilateralism,”¹⁴ which have resulted in the alienation of former allies worldwide. Predominantly Muslim nations, whose citizens had previously looked to the United States as an example of representative governance, viewed the Iraq invasion as the seminal dividing action between the Western and the Islamic world. Appropriately, any future American interventions into the internal affairs of another sovereign nation must first seek to establish consensus by gaining the approval of a body representing global opinion, and must reject military unilateralism as a threat to that governing body's legitimacy.

Despite the long-standing U.S. tradition of a liberal foreign policy since the start of the Cold War, the famous liberal leviathan, John Ikenberry, argues that “the post-9/11 doctrine of national security strategy . . . has been based on . . . American global dominance, the preventative use of force, coalitions of the willing, and the struggle between liberty and evil.”¹⁵ American foreign policy has misguidedly focused on spreading democracy, as opposed to building a liberal international order based on universally accepted principles that actually set the conditions for individual nation states to select their own system of governance. Anne-Marie Slaughter, the former Dean of the

Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, argues that true Wilsonian idealists “support liberal democracy, but reject the possibility of democratizing peoples . . .”¹⁶ and reject military primacy in favor of supporting a rules-based system of order.

Investment in a liberal world order would also set the conditions for the United States to garner support from noncommitted regional powers (i.e., Russia, India, Japan, etc.), or “swing civilizations,” in countering China's increasing hegemonic influence.¹⁷ These states reside within close proximity to the Indian Ocean, which will likely emerge as the geopolitical focus of the American foreign policy during the 21st century, and appropriately have the ability to offset China's imperial dominance in the region.¹⁸

Critics of a liberal world construct argue that idealism is not necessary, based on the assumption that nations that trade together will not go to war with each other.¹⁹ In response, foreign affairs columnist Thomas L. Friedman rebukes their arguments, acknowledging the predicate of commercial interdependence as a factor only in the decision to go to war, and argues that while globalization is creating a new international order, differences between civilizations still create friction that may overcome all other factors and lead to conflict.²⁰

Detractors also warn that as China grows in power, it will no longer observe “the basic rules and principles of a liberal international order,” which largely result from Western concepts of foreign relations. Ikenberry addresses this risk, citing that China's leaders already recognize that they will gain more authority within the existing liberal order, as opposed to contesting it. China's leaders “want the protection and rights that come from the international order's . . . defense of sovereignty,”²¹ from which they have benefitted during their recent history of economic growth and international expansion.

Even if China executes a peaceful rise and the United States overestimates a Sinic threat to its national security interest, the emergence of a new imperial power will challenge American leadership in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific region. That being said, it is more likely that China, as evidenced by its military and economic expansion, will displace the United States as the regional hegemonic power. Recognizing this threat now, the United States must prepare for the eventual transition and immediately begin building the legitimacy and support of a system of rules that will protect its interests later when we are no longer the world's only superpower.

Endnotes

1. Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, New York: Random House, 2010, pp. xii-17, 279.
2. William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, Washington, DC: The White House, February 1995, p. 9. For a historical perspective on “Enlargement” and the democratic peace theory, see Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century,” in *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 98.
3. Masako Ikegami, “New Imperial China: A Challenge for the US-Japan Alliance,” *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 122, July 12, 2011. For more information, see Masako Ikegami, “Neo-Imperialism: China's Quasi-Manchukuo Policy toward North Korea, Mongolia, and Myanmar,” *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 4, April 2011, pp. 61-98. Ikegami provided the second article in an August 20, 2011, personal correspondence to the author in response to an inquiry for more information regarding her comparison of China's actions to Imperial Japan of the 1930s. In the interest of brevity, I paraphrased her abbreviated thesis from the shorter note in the *Asia Pacific Bulletin*. In her correspondence to me, Ikegami also provided the following update regarding the article in the *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs*, “A better version of the full paper is forthcoming from the Indian Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, (IDSA) any time soon. I presented the same study at IDSA's Asian Security Conference this February. . . .”
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.* Ikegami characterizes North Korea and Burma, both of which border China, as “rich in natural resources yet domestically politically repressive.” Ikegami contends that control of these two countries exemplify China's “Quasi-Manchukuo” model.
6. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, p. 168.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 92. For clarification, Huntington posited that “as Western power declines, the ability of the West to impose Western concepts of human rights, liberalism, and democracy on other civilizations also declines and so does the attractiveness of those values to other civilizations.”
9. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
10. The collapse of either Afghanistan or Pakistan as nation states threatens to draw the United States, Russia, China, Iran, and India into a regional conflict.

11. G. John Ikenberry, “Woodrow Wilson, the Bush Administration, and the Future of Liberal Internationalism,” in *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 22.

12. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect*, Ontario, Canada: The International Development Research Centre, 2001, p. xi, available from www.iciss.ca/pdf/Commission-Report.pdf. For more information on the report, see Slaughter, pp. 100-103. Slaughter contends that the “report outlines the most important shift in the nature of sovereignty since the Treaty of Westphalia. . . .”

13. Slaughter, p. 101.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

15. Ikenberry, “Woodrow Wilson, the Bush Administration, and the Future of Liberal Internationalism,” p. 1.

16. Slaughter, p. 91. When discussing the differences between Wilsonianism and the Bush Doctrine, the full argument reads that Wilsonianism is committed “not to cooperation and collective action but to an entire liberal international order—an integrated set of rules, institutions, and practices that allow nations to achieve positive-sum outcomes. We support liberal democracy, but reject the possibility of democratizing peoples. . . . And we reject U.S. military primacy, preferring instead to maintain a balance of power in favor of liberal democracies worldwide.”

17. Huntington, p. 185. Huntington identified seven distinct widely-known civilizations, of which he identifies Orthodox, Hindu, and Japanese as the three states whose support the West should seek in countering China.

18. Robert D. Kaplan, “Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power,” Paper presented at the Naval War College, November 8, 2010. *C-Span*, video file, available from www.c-spanvideo.org/program/Monsoon. The caption introducing the video reads:

Robert Kaplan talked about the geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean region to U.S. power and security in the 21st century. He argued that the shift in the global balance would make the Indian Ocean the true nexus of world power and conflict over issues such as democracy, energy independence, and religious freedom in the coming years and there that American foreign policy must focus to remain influential in an ever-changing world. Topics included the effects that explosive population growth, climate change, and extremist politics may have in the region. He responded to questions from members of the audience. “The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power” was part of the Naval War College Evening Lecture Series in the Spruance Auditorium. The international lecture was sponsored by the Naval War College Foundation.

Kaplan contends that the geopolitical focus of the United States will shift to the Indian Ocean. He did not present the conclusion that the focus would shift from terrorism.

19. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, 2nd Ed., New York: Random House, 2000, p. 249. The predicate of their arguments rely upon the assumption that nations with increased interdependence from a networked world will avoid armed conflict with a trade partner due to the disproportionate costs. Friedman notes that historians, from the 18th century philosopher Montesquieu to early 20th century British writer Norman Angell, have similarly claimed that commercially dependent trade partners would not fight each other and implies that history has proved otherwise. For more information, see Huntington, p. 58. Providing a realists view to world order, Huntington argues that globalization will not prevent conflict, stating that “. . . the spread of Western consumption patterns and popular culture around the world will not create a universal civilization. . . . Cultural fads have been transmitted from civilization to civilization throughout history . . . without altering the underlying culture of the recipient civilization.” He then points to terrorists in the Middle East, who might enjoy consuming American consumer products, yet plan attacks on Western targets. Huntington provides the following anecdotal example. “Somewhere in the Middle East a half-dozen young men could well be dressed in jeans, drinking Coke, listening to rap, and, between their bows to Mecca, putting together a bomb to blow up an American airliner.” Although this example has several fallacies and draws attention to the Muslim vs. West conflict, as opposed to the West vs. Sino conflict addressed within this paper, it illustrates how the expansion of consumer products does not equate to the creation of a single global civilization.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

21. G. John Ikenberry, “Will the Liberal Global Order Outlast America?” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011, pp. 57-63.

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